

Country buying is on a decline. Ranchers at the coffee houses speak more and more of sending their stock to such and such yard for sorting and selling, and the highway passing through the ranch doesn't carry near the traffic in livestock dollars that it once did. Commission men and order buyers seem to treat the small outposts as if our principal crops were second run oatmeal.

An eastern old ewe buyer was lured to the ranch last summer. He drove over 100 miles to buy the sheep. Unfortunately, traffic had been light, so he had ample opportunity to manufacture a perfect mask of buyer's indifference.

The ruse that he chose was the old terrapin act. You know the sequence I speak of — the ancient scene where the buyer withdraws under his hat brim so far that the seller can't see any of his features except the tip of his nose.

Psychiatrists would never have analyzed their first case, using nothing but noses to work on. Sigmund Freud couldn't have found a sub-conscience drivell had he been forced to study noses. Not even elephant trainers can work their subjects without seeing their eyes, and don't let anybody tell you that an elephant isn't about as long on snout as any creature on this earth. Noses just don't reveal a thing, unless you happen to belong to some cult that puts a special meaning on freckles or blotches.

Anyhow, the old boy landed his pickup and walked in the pens well shaded by his hat. He responded to my sales talk in untranslatable grunts. I'd estimate his sheep buying temperature was about six degrees below that of the already shattered wool market. (Normal temperature for a sheep buyer in 1970 runs about 92.6 degrees, 94 degrees is considered a high fever. Sheep buying fever can be broken by one baby aspirin per 100 pounds of body weight).

The way he moved around the corral was unnerving. He'd sift a few ewes by, then walk over and look at an ant bed in the corner of the corral. Window shopping women show more purpose on a Saturday stroll than he did. I've seen crowds enthralled by a circus parade that couldn't have matched his interest in the ant bed.

Finally he began to talk above a mumble. He said the ewes were all right, but he couldn't give the full price because some of them had old shearing cuts on their udders and teats.

Don't ever ask me where that complaint came from. I've heard buyers badmouth deals for over 20 years. I've seen those San Angelo slickers give a herd a going over that would make a tick inspector think he needed bifocals. But I never heard a buyer mention nicked teats.

All that time I thought he was watching the ant trails. However, what he was doing was thinking up the fanciest tale that had been spun since Shakespeare retired.

Well, the only thing we could do to get together was estimate how many nicks there were and figure up a paper discount. It would have been too complicated to start adding and subtracting on a per head basis.

Word of his conquest has spread among the trading circles. In the past few weeks, I've had several buyers eager to come out and do some business.

Advertising comes in many forms; it's sure heartening to be known as a discount house.